21: Kolarz J-4 (no date) 1952 R1 Soviet Union R1
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III. BYELORUSSIA

The development of Soviet Byelorussia is essentially a copy of the history of the Soviet Ukraine. In many respects it is a very poor copy. Byelorussia is considerably smaller than the Ukraine, it has no outstanding economic wealth such as the Ukraine has and the national consciousness of the Byelorussian people has crystallized far less than that of the Ukrainians. The Byelorussians, it is true, can boast of an illustrious past and can claim for themselves the Lithuanian State of the Middle Ages, whose most important documents were couched in the Byelorussian language. However, the Byelorussians did not produce a Hetman Mazeppa, a vigorous rebel whose memory could inspire the present generation. The modesty of the Byelorussian national movement is almost touching. Nothing could characterize its spirit better than the title of the first Byelorussian publishing company founded in 1906 – 'In our windows also shall the sun shine'.

Byelorussian nationalism in Czarist times was so weak that no Byelorussian succeeded in getting elected to the Duma. The landowners voted for Polish candidates, and the peasants, in their ignorance, for extreme Russian nationalists. The October Revolution found the Byelorussians still too inarticulate as a nation to be able to cope with the great tests of the revolutionary years. Without much external pressure Byelorussia, or rather, what might have become Byelorussia, fell to pieces. The few Byelorussian intellectuals had no clearly defined political aim and turned from one extreme to another, wavering between a Polish, Lithuanian and Russian orientation and thus aggravating the chaos in which the Byelorussian people found themselves. By the end of 1920 the Byelorussians were under five different Byelorussian governments and National Committees, and in addition, had a Minister for Byelorussian Affairs in the Lithuanian Government.

At last the Peace of Riga concluded between Poland and Soviet Russia in 1921 determined the division of Byelorussia: Western Byelorussia with about 2,000,000 Byelorussians went to Poland, while Central and Eastern Byelorussia became part of the Soviet Union.*

SOVIET POLICY IN EASTERN BYELORUSSIA

At first the Soviet régime found it rather difficult to decide which territories to allocate to the Byelorussian S.S.R. When the B.S.S.R. was formally constituted on January 16th, 1921, the Russian communists

* The estimate of 2,000,000 is halfway between Polish and Russian statistics. According to the official Polish census there were but 1,123,000 Byelorussians in 'Western Byelorussia'. Molotov mentioned the figure of 3,000,000 when proclaiming the incorporation of Western Byelorussia into the U.S.S.R. on October 31st, 1939.

had such a poor view of the strength of the Byelorussian national consciousness that they confined the Republic to a small border strip of 20,000 square miles and 1,500,000 inhabitants. Important Byelorussian districts with the towns of Vitebsk, Gomel and Mogilev remained within the R.S.F.S.R.

It took the Soviet central Government three years to transform the 'token republic' of Byelorussia into one which comprised the bulk of the Byelorussians living in a coherent territory in the western part of European Russia. On March 3rd, 1924, the Central Executive Committee of the U.S.S.R. issued a decree on the 'unification of all territories of the U.S.S.R. having a majority of Byelorussian population'. As a result of this decree the B.S.S.R. was able to enlarge its territory to 42,000 square miles and its population to 4,200,000.

Even after the 'unification decree' certain Byelorussian areas of the Soviet Union remained outside the B.S.S.R. and on December 6th, 1926, a new decree was published to rectify this situation by adding to Byelorussia some further territories including the town of Gomel. Through this second operation Byelorussia became a country of 48,000 square miles with nearly 5,000,000 inhabitants.

The 1926 census showed that great confusion persisted in Byelorussia as to who was a Byelorussian and who was not. Thus out of 4,017,000 ethnical Byelorussians only 3,350,000 declared their language to be Byelorussian. On the other hand the census recorded only 383,000 Great Russians in Byelorussia, although 1,165,000 people considered Great Russian as their language.

The basic difficulty which the Soviet régime encountered among the Byelorussians was, however, not the language question, but the fact that the Byelorussian people had hardly any 'revolutionary vanguard' in the form of an industrial proletariat worth mentioning. The five predominantly Byelorussian Governments ('Gubernyas') of the Czarist Empire had in 1913 but 69,000 industrial workers of whom by no means all belonged to the Byelorussian people.

Although Soviet statistics claimed that Byelorussian industry increased twenty-one-fold between 1913 and 1937, industrialization and urbanization made less progress in Byelorussia than in most other parts of European Russia. The major Byelorussian towns did not share in the general speedy growth of Soviet cities, nor did any new 'mushroom towns' emerge. Of the 174 towns of the Soviet Union which in 1939 had over 50,000 inhabitants only five were in Byelorussia and the largest Byelorussian town, Minsk, occupied the thirty-second place among the cities of the U.S.S.R. Byelorussia's towns were in the inter-war period only partially Byelorussian from the ethnical point of view, since they all had very large Jewish populations and included also a considerable number of Great Russians. In 1926 Minsk had 43·6 per cent Jewish